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NEW YORK TIMES
19 February 1987

C.I.A. Nominee Expected to Win Senate Backing

But the Panel Will Wait for Report on Inquiry

By **STEPHEN ENGELBERG**

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 18 — Robert M. Gates appeared today to be headed for Senate confirmation as Director of Central Intelligence after more than nine hours of hearings that underscored the depth of Congressional unhappiness with the Reagan Administration's Iran dealings.

Senator William Cohen, the Maine Republican who is vice chairman of the Select Committee on intelligence, said the panel would probably vote to confirm Mr. Gates, barring any damaging revelations about the Iran-contra affair. But he said the committee would not vote until after the special Presidential commission that is investigating the dealings with Iran delivers its report next week.

At the hearings, some Senators were clearly frustrated by Mr. Gates's refusal to pledge that he would resign if the President asked him to keep a covert operation secret from Congress for an extended period.

'You're Learning, Mr. Gates'

By the end of today's hearing, however, it was clear Mr. Gates had got the message. Asked by Senator Bill Bradley, Democrat of New Jersey, what he would do if he found out another Government agency involved in a covert intelligence operation had not reported to the committee, he said, "The first thing I would do is hop in a car and come up here."

"You're learning, Mr. Gates," Mr. Bradley replied.

"No one ever accused me of being slow," Mr. Gates said.

For the last two days, the usually secretive Senate intelligence committee has been the focus of attention in Washington as Mr. Gates was closely questioned about his actions as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence.

Mr. Gates has had to steer a narrow path to avoid offending three important constituencies: a Senate committee irate over the Administration's actions, White House officials who gave him a Cabinet post even though he was not a Reagan intimate and present and former C.I.A. officials, including William J. Casey, the former Director.

Mr. Gates chose, by and large, to risk irritating the committee and his own agency. As a result, his confirmation hearings were not an altogether smooth voyage. In attempting to defend the Administration, or preserve his prerogatives as Director, he occasionally angered the committee.

Mr. Gates also angered officials at the C.I.A. by delivering two days of testimony that was largely critical of the agency's performance. "He sold out the agency to protect his career," said an intelligence source with close ties to the C.I.A.

At the hearings, several of the Republican and Democratic Senators suggested that Mr. Gates, the youngest man ever nominated as Director of Central Intelligence, was more interested in continuing his rapid rise through the ranks of Government than in challenging more senior officials. Their questions focused on hints that came to Mr. Gates last October and November that profits from the Iran arms sales were going to the contras.

Accused of 'Passing the Buck'

Mr. Bradley, for instance, contended today that when Mr. Gates investigated charges by a senior C.I.A. analyst that the Iran money was going to the contras, he essentially "passed the buck" to Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, then the national security adviser. Mr. Casey and Mr. Gates twice met with Admiral Poindexter in the weeks before the Iran operation unraveled.

Mr. Gates said that he had simply moved the matter to higher-level officials who had more complete information about the Iran dealings.

The committee wanted to know more about Mr. Gates's role in preparing Mr. Casey for testimony he gave before the committee last Nov. 21, which one Republican committee member, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, termed "skimpy, scanty, uninformative and really misleading."

After repeated suggestions that he was overly willing to acquiesce in the poor judgements of his superiors, Mr. Gates, who is not a man given to emotional outbursts, shot back:

"Sycophants can only rise to a certain level. There is an ample supply of them in this town, and they only go so far. Senior officials understand that the most dangerous thing in the world is a yes man and the people I have worked for felt the candor with which I apprised them was a valuable asset."